

2004 Ontario Field Report

The 2004 Field Report season has been a mix of successes tempered by a growing sense of urgency as the wild population of Eastern Loggerhead Shrikes continues to decline.

Wild Population: Extensive population monitoring started in May in two of the remaining core areas: the Napanee and Carden Plains. In the Carden Plain, 14 breeding pairs were found and monitored. Eleven of these pairs nested and fledged between 3 and 6 young each, totalling 59 fledglings. One pair successfully nested twice over the summer. This year we observed birds in Carden that had been banded as nestlings the year before in the same area, which is a very good sign for the population.

In Napanee, the numbers weren't quite as good. Despite a considerable amount of surveying by local shrike biologist Kurt Hennige and his group of dedicated volunteers, only 13 wild pairs were found, down from 25 pairs in 2002 Field Report. Six nests were predated this year. Seven pairs nested successfully and produced a total of 21 fledglings. In total, 79 young shrikes that fledged in the wild in Ontario this year were observed to be still alive and healthy 2 weeks after leaving their nests.

Field Propagation and Releases: Since 2001 Field Report, we have been experimenting with the design of our field breeding enclosures to maximize productivity and to improve the fitness of each and every release bird. This year 10 pairs housed at the Toronto Zoo were transported to field breeding enclosures at Smiths Falls, and a further 10 pairs from our Ingersoll overwintering facility were moved up to Dyer's Bay.

Our new, larger field breeding enclosures provided ample room for parents to raise one or two broods over the summer. Five of the pairs bred successfully in Smiths Falls, producing 21 young. In Dyer's Bay, 4 of the breeding pairs produced 18 young. Several young with an important genetic profile were held back this year to be included in the captive breeding program for next year.

In August, 32 young were successfully released into the wild by our staff and were later observed feeding from the supplemental feeding corrals. The young released this year were strong fliers, exhibited predator-avoidance, and were hunting wild dragonflies and grasshoppers soon after leaving the enclosures.

A very pleasant surprise this year was the successful breeding of 4 pairs at our new overwintering facility in Ingersoll. These 4 pair produced 14 young, 6 of which were released at our Dyer's Bay site. One pair double-clutched and fledged a total of 6 chicks. The fact that these pairs are breeding in our new facility in Ingersoll attests to the fact that the captive conditions are as stress-free and relaxing as we can make them.

We have been making great strides. Since 2001 Field Report, we've released 56 captive-bred shrikes into the wild. Next season we hope to increase breeding so that we can start producing significant numbers of release birds. Species recovery is a long road, but we are greatly encouraged by the success of this past season!

by Rina Nichols